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Love-Story Masterpieces

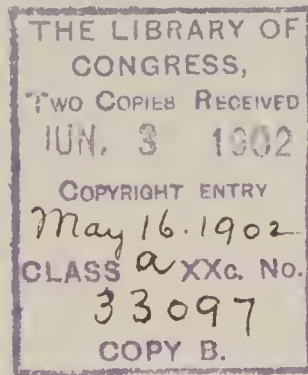
LOVE-STORY
MASTERPIECES

MEREDITH MITCHELL
STEVENSON HOLMES

CHOSEN BY
RALPH A. LYON

WILLIAM S. LORD
EVANSTON

1902



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1902
BY WILLIAM S. LORD

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1902

Give beauty all her right,—
She's not to one forme tyed;
Each shape yeelds faire delight,
Where her perfections bide.
Helen, I grant, might pleasing be;
And Ros'mond was as sweet as shee.

Some, the quicke eye commends ·
Some, swelling lips and red;
Pale lookes have many friends,
Through sacred sweetnesse bred.
Medowes have flowres that pleasure move,
Though Roses are the flowres of love.

Free beauty is not bound
To one unmoved clime:
She visits ev'ry ground,
And favours ev'ry time.
Let the old loves with mine compare,
My Sov'raigne is as sweet and fair.

—THOMAS CAMPION.

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An Idyl of First Love

BY

GEORGE MEREDITH

NOTE

"An Idyl of First Love" consists of two chapters from George Meredith's first novel, "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel." These chapters, taken bodily from the context, form a complete prose poem, portraying "one of the most perfect love scenes in the whole range of fiction."

"A 'Dream-Life' Love-Story," which, in its way, is equally as charming as the preceding story, is from "Dream-Life," by "Ik Marvel."

An Idyl of First Love

BY

GEORGE MEREDITH

I

PRELUDE

Above green-flashing plunges of a weir, and shaken by the thunder below, lilies, golden and white, were swaying at anchor among the reeds. Meadow-sweet hung from the banks thick with weed and trailing bramble, and there also hung a daughter of earth. Her face was shaded by a broad straw-hat with a flexile brim that left her lips and chin in the sun, and sometimes nodding sent forth a light of promising eyes. Across her shoulders, and behind, flowed large loose curls, brown in

shadow, almost golden where the ray touched them. She was simply dressed, befitting decency and the season. On a closer inspection you might see that her lips were stained. This blooming young person was regaling on dewberries.

They grew beneath the bank and the water. Apparently she found the fruit abundant, for her hand was making pretty progress to her mouth. Fastidious youth, which shudders and revolts at woman plumping her exquisite proportions on bread-and-butter, and would (we must suppose) joyfully have her quite scraggy to have her quite poetical, can hardly object to dewberries. Indeed the act of eating them is dainty and induces musing. The dewberry is a sister to the lotus, and an innocent sister. You eat: mouth, eye, and hand are occupied, and the undrugged mind free to roam. And so it was with the damsel who knelt there. The little

skylark went up above her, all song, to the smooth southern cloud lying along the blue: from a dewy copse standing dark over her nodding hat, the black-bird fluted, calling to her with thrice mellow note: the kingfisher flashed emerald out of green osiers: a bow-winged heron travelled aloft, seeking solitude: a boat slipped towards her, containing a dreamy youth, and still she plucked the fruit, and ate, and mused, as if no fairy prince were invading her territories, and as if she wished not for one, or knew not her wishes. Surrounded by the green shaven meadows, the pastoral summer buzz, the weir-fall's thundering white, amid the breath and beauty of wild-flowers, she was a bit of lovely human life in a fair setting: a terrible attraction. The Magnetic Youth leaned round to note his proximity to the weir-piles, and beheld the sweet vision. Stiller and

still grew nature, as at the meeting of two electric clouds. Her posture was so graceful that, though he was making straight for the weir, he dared not dip a scull. Just then one most enticing dewberry caught her eyes. He was floating by unheeded, and saw that her hand stretched low, and could not gather what it sought. A stroke from his right brought him beside her. The damsel glanced up dismayed, and her whole shape trembled over the brink. Richard sprang from his boat into the water. Pressing a hand beneath her foot, which she had thrust against the crumbling wet sides of the bank to save herself, he enabled her to recover her balance, and gain safe earth, whither, emboldened by the incident, touching her finger's tip, he followed her.

II

FERDINAND AND MIRANDA

He had landed on an Island of the still-vexed Bermoothes. The world lay wrecked behind him: Raynham hung in mists, remote, a phantom to the vivid reality of this white hand which had drawn him thither away thousands of leagues in an eye-twinkle. Hark, how Ariel sung overhead! What splendour in the heavens! What marvels of beauty about his enchanted head! And, O you Wonder! Fair Flame! by whose light the glories of being are now first seen . . . Radiant Miranda! Prince Ferdinand is at your feet.

Or is it Adam, his rib taken from his side in sleep, and thus transformed, to

make him behold his Paradise, and lose it? . . .

The youth looked on her with as glowing an eye. It was the First Woman to him.

And she—mankind was all Calaban to her, saving this one princely youth.

So to each other said their changing eyes in the moment they stood together; he pale, and she blushing.

She was indeed sweetly fair, and would have been held fair among rival damsels. On a magic shore, and to a youth educated by a System, strung like an arrow drawn to the head, he, it might be guessed, could fly fast and far with her. The soft rose in her cheeks, the clearness of her eyes, bore witness to the body's virtue; and health and happy blood were in her bearing. Had she stood before Sir Austin among rival damsels, that Scientific Humanist, for the consummation of his System,

would have thrown her the handkerchief for his son. The wide summer hat nodding over her forehead to her brows, seemed to flow with the flowing, heavy curls, and those fire-threaded mellow curls, only half-curls, waves of hair, call them, rippling at the ends, went like a sunny red-veined torrent down her back almost to her waist: a glorious vision to the youth, who embraced it as a flower of beauty, and read not a feature. There were curious features of colour in her face for him to have read. Her brows, thick and brownish against a soft skin showing the action of the blood, met in the bend of a bow, extending to the temples long and level: you saw that she was fashioned to peruse the sights of earth, and by the pliability of her brows, that the wonderful creature used her faculty, and was not going to be a statue to the gazer. Under the dark thick brows an

arch of lashes shot out, giving a wealth of darkness to the full, frank, blue eyes, a mystery of meaning—more than brain was ever meant to fathom: richer henceforth than all mortal wisdom to Prince Ferdinand. For when nature turns artist, and produces contrasts of colour on a fair face, where is the Sage, or what the Oracle, shall match the depth of its lightest look?

Prince Ferdinand was also fair. In his slim boating-attire his figure looked heroic. His hair, rising from the parting to the right of his forehead, in what his admiring Lady Blandish called his plume, fell away slanting silkily to the temples across the nearly imperceptible upward curve of his brows there—felt more than seen, so slight it was—and gave to his profile a bold beauty, to which his bashful, breathless air was a flattering charm. An arrow drawn to the head, capable of flying fast and far

with her! He leaned a little forward to her, drinking her in with all his eyes, and young Love has a thousand. Then truly the System triumphed, just ere it was to fall; and could Sir Austin have been content to draw the arrow to the head, and let it fly, when it would fly, he might have pointed to his son again, and said to the world, "Match him!" Such keen bliss as the youth had in the sight of her, an innocent youth alone has powers of soul in him to experience.

If these two were Ferdinand and Miranda, Sir Austin was not Prospero, and was not present, or their fates might have been different.

So they stood a moment changing eyes, and the Miranda spoke, and they came down to earth, feeling no less in heaven.

She spoke to thank him for his aid. She used quite common simple words;

and used them, no doubt, to express a common, simple meaning; but to him she was uttering magic, casting spells, and the effect they had on him was manifested in the incoherence of his replies, which were too foolish to be chronicled.

The couple was again mute. Suddenly Miranda, with an exclamation of anguish, and innumerable lights and shadows playing over her lovely face, clapped her hands, crying aloud, "My book! my book!" and ran to the bank.

Prince Ferdinand was at her side. "What have you lost?" he said.

"My book! my book!" she answered, her long, delicious curls swinging across her shoulders to the stream. Then turning to him, divining his rash intention, "Oh, no, no! let me entreat you not to," she said. "I do not so very much mind losing it." And in her eagerness to restrain him, she uncon-

sciously laid her gentle hand upon his arm, and took the force of motion out of him.

"Indeed I do not really care for the silly book," she continued, withdrawing her hand quickly, and reddening. "Pray do not!"

The young gentleman had kicked off his shoes. No sooner was the spell of contact broken, than he jumped in. The water was still troubled and discoloured by his introductory adventure, and though he ducked his head with the spirit of a dabchick, the book was missing. A scrap of paper floating from the bramble just above the water, and looking as if fire had caught its edges and it had flown from one adverse element to the other, was all he could lay hold of, and he returned to land disconsolately to hear Miranda's murmured mixing of thanks and pretty expostulations.

"Let me try again," he said.

"No, indeed!" she replied, and used the awful threat: "I will run away if you do," which effectively restrained him.

Her eye fell on the fire-stained scrap of paper, and brightened, as she cried, "There—there! you have what I want. It is that. I do not care for the book.—No, please! You are not to look at it. Give it me."

Before her playfully-imperative injunction was fairly spoken, Richard had glanced at the document, and discovered a Griffin between two wheat sheaves: his crest, in silver: and below, O wonderment, immense! his own handwriting! remnant of his burnt Offering! a page of the sacrificed Poems! one Blossom preserved from the deadly universal blight.

He handed it to her in silence. She took it and put it in her bosom.

Who would have said, have thought, that, where all else perished, Odes, fluttering bits of broad-winged Epic, Idyls, Lines, Stanzas, this one Sonnet to the Stars should be miraculously reserved for such a starry fate! passing beatitude!

As they walked across the meadow, Richard strove to remember the hour, and the mood of mind, in which he had composed the notable production. The stars were invoked, as seeing, and foreseeing, all, to tell him where then his love reclined, and so forth; Hesper was complacent enough to do so, and described her in a couplet:

“Through sunset's amber see me shining fair,
As her blue eyes shine through her golden hair.”

And surely no words could be more prophetic. Here were two blue eyes, and golden hair; and by some strange chance, that appeared like the working of a divine finger, she had become the

possessor of the prophecy, she that was to fulfil it! The youth was too charged with emotion to speak. Doubtless the damsel had less to think of, or had some trifling burden on her conscience, for she seemed to grow embarrassed. At last she drew up her chin to look at her companion under the nodding brim of her hat (and the action gave her a charmingly freakish air), crying, "But where are you going to? You are wet through. Let me thank you again, and pray leave me, and go home, and change instantly."

"Wet?" replied the magnetic muser, with a voice of tender interest, "not more than one foot, I hope? I will leave you while you dry your stocking in the sun."

At this she could not withhold a shy and lovely laugh.

"Not I, but you. You know you saved me, and would try to get that

silly book for me, and you are dripping wet. Are you not very uncomfortable?"

In all sincerity he assured her that he was not.

"And you really do not feel that you are wet?"

He really did not: it was a fact that he spoke truth.

She pursed her sweet dewberry mouth in the most comical way, and her blue eyes lightened laughter out of the half-closed lids.

"I cannot help it," she said, her mouth opening, and sounding harmonious bells of laughter to his ears. "Pardon me, won't you?"

His face took the same soft smiling curves in admiration of her.

"Not to feel that you have been in the water the very moment after!" she musically interjected, seeing she was excused.

"It's true," he said; and his own

gravity then touched him to join a duet with her, which made them no longer feel strangers, and did the work of a month of intimacy. Better than sentiment laughter opens the breast to love; opens the whole breast to his full quiver, instead of a corner here and there for a solitary arrow. Hail the occasion propitious, O, ye British young! and laugh, and treat love as an honest God, and dabble not with the sentimental rouge. These two laughed, and the souls of each cried out to other, "It is I," "It is I."

They laughed and forgot the cause of their laughter, and the sun dried his light river-clothing, and they strolled towards the blackbird's copse, and stood near a stile, in sight of the foam of the weir, and the many-coloured rings of eddies streaming forth from it.

Richard's boat, meanwhile, had contrived to shoot the weir, and was swing-

ing, bottom upwards, broadside with the current down the rapid backwater.

"Will you let it go?" said the damsel, eyeing it curiously.

"Yes," he replied, and low, as if he spoke in the core of his thought: "What do I care for it now?"

His old life was whirled away with it, dead, drowned. His new life was with her, alive, divine.

She flapped low the brim of her hat. "You must really not come any farther," she softly said.

"And will you go, and not tell me who you are?" he asked, growing bold as the fears of losing her came across him: "And will you not tell me before you go," his faced burned, "how you came by that—that paper?"

She chose to select the easier question to reply to: "You ought to know me; we have been introduced." Sweet was her winning, off-hand affability.

"Then who, in heaven's name, are you? Tell me! I never could have forgotten you."

"You have, I think," she said demurely.

"Impossible that we could ever have met, and I forget you!"

She looked up to him quickly.

"Do you remember Belthorpe?"

"Belthorpe! Belthorpe!" quoth Richard, as if he had to touch his brain to recollect there was such a place. "Do you mean old Blaize's farm?"

"Then I am old Blaize's niece." She tripped him a soft curtsey.

The magnetized youth gazed at her. By what magic was it that this divine sweet creature could be allied with that old churl!

"Then what—what is your name?" said his mouth, while his eyes added, "O wonderful creature! How came you to enrich the earth?"

"Have you forgot the Desboroughs of Dorset, too?" she peered at him archly from a side bend of the flapping brim.

"The Desboroughs of Dorset?" A light broke in on him. "And have you grown to this? That little girl I saw there!"

He drew close to her to read the nearest features of the vision. She could no more laugh off the piercing fervour of his eyes. Her volubility fluttered under his deeply wistful look, and now neither voice was high, and they were mutually constrained.

"You see," she murmured, "we are old acquaintances."

Richard, with his eyes still intently fixed on her, returned: "You are very beautiful!"

The words slipped out. Perfect simplicity is unconsciously audacious. Her overpowering beauty struck his heart,

and like an instrument that is touched and answers to the touch, he spoke.

Miss Desborough made an effort to trifle with this terrible directness: but his eyes would not be gainsaid, and checked her lips. She turned away from them, her bosom a little rebellious. Praise so passionately spoken, and by one who has been a damsel's first dream, dreamed of nightly many long nights, and clothed in the virgin silver of her thoughts in bud, praise from him is coin the heart cannot reject, if it would. She quickened her steps to the stile.

"I have offended you!" said a mortally wounded voice across her shoulder.

That he should think so were too dreadful.

"Oh, no, no! you would never offend me." She gave him her whole sweet face.

"Then why—why do you leave me?"

"Because," she hesitated, "I must go."

"No. You must not go. Why must you go? Do not go."

"Indeed, I must," she said, pulling at the obnoxious broad brim of her hat; and, interpreting a pause he made for his assent to her sensible resolve, shyly looking at him, she held her hand out, and said, "Good-bye," as if it were a natural thing to say.

The hand was pure white; white and fragrant as the frosted blossom of a May night. It was the hand whose shadow, cast before, he had last night bent his head reverentially above, and kissed—resigning himself thereupon over to execution for payment of the penalty of such daring: by such bliss well rewarded.

He took the hand, and held it; gazing between her eyes.

"Good-bye," she said again, as frankly as she could, and at the same time

slightly compressing her fingers on his in token of adieu. It was a signal for his to close firmly upon hers.

"You will not go?"

"Pray let me," she pleaded, her sweet brows suing in wrinkles.

"You will not go?" Mechanically he drew the white hand nearer his thumping heart.

"I must," she faltered piteously.

"You will not go?"

"O, yes, yes!"

"Tell me. Do you wish to go?"

The question was subtle. A moment or two she did not answer, and then forswore herself, and said, "Yes."

"Do you—do you wish to go?" He looked with quivering eyelids under hers.

A fainter, Yes, responded to his passionate repetition.

"You wish—wish to leave me?" His breath went with the words.

"Indeed, I must."

Her hand became a closer prisoner.

All at once an alarming, delicious shudder went through her frame. From him to her it coursed, and back from her to him. Forward and back love's electric messenger rushed from heart to heart, knocking at each, till it surged tumultuously against the bars of its prison, crying out for its mate. They stood trembling in unison, a lovely couple under those fair Heavens of the morning.

When he could get his voice, it was, "Will you go?"

But she had none to reply with, and could only mutely bend upward her gentle wrist.

"Then, farewell," he said, and dropping his lips to the soft fair hand, kissed it, and hung his head, swinging away from her, ready for death.

Strange, that now she was released

she should linger by him. Strange, that his audacity, instead of the executioner, brought blushes and timid tenderness to his side, and the sweet words, "You are not angry with me?"

"With you, O Beloved!" cried his soul. "And you forgive me, Fair Charity?"

She repeated her words in deeper sweetness to his bewildered look; and he, inexperienced, possessed by her, almost lifeless with the divine new emotions she had realized in him, could only sigh, and gaze at her wonderingly.

"I think it was rude of me to go without thanking you again," she said, and again she proffered her hand.

The sweet heaven-bird shivered out his song above him. The gracious glory of heaven fell upon his soul. He touched her hand, not moving his eyes from her, nor speaking, and she, with

a soft word of farewell, passed across the stile, and up the pathway through the dewy shades of the copse, and out of the arch of the light, away from his eyes.

And away with her went the wild enchantment: he looked on barren air. But it was no more the world of yesterday. The marvellous splendours had sown seeds in him, ready to spring up and bloom at her gaze; and in his bosom now the vivid conjuration of her tones, her face, her shape, makes them leap and illumine him like fitful summer lightnings—ghosts of the vanished sun.

There was nothing to tell him that he had been making love and declaring it with extraordinary rapidity: nor did he know it. Soft flushed cheeks! sweet mouth! strange sweet brows! eyes of softest fire! how could his ripe eyes behold you, and not plead to keep you?

Nay, how could he let you go? And he seriously asks himself that question.

To-morrow this place will have a memory—the river, and the meadow, and the white, falling weir: his heart will build a temple here; and the skylark will be its high-priest, and the old black-bird its glossy-gowned chorister, and there will be a sacred repast of dewberries. To-day the grass is grass: his heart is chased by phantoms, and finds rest nowhere. Only when the most tender freshness of his flower comes across him, does he taste a moment's calm; and no sooner does it come than it gives place to keen pangs of fear that she may not be his forever.

III

A DIVERSION PLAYED ON A PENNY WHISTLE

Away with Systems! Away with a corrupt World! Let us breathe the air of the Enchanted Island.

Golden lie the meadows: golden run the streams: red gold is on the pine-stems. The sun is coming down to earth, and the fields and the waters shout to him golden shouts. He comes, and his heralds run before him, and touch the leaves of oaks, and planes, and beeches lucid green, and the pine-stems redder gold; leaving brightest foot-prints upon thickly weeded banks, where the fox-glove's last upper-bells incline, and bramble-shoots wander amid moist rich herbage. The

plumes of the woodland are alight; and beyond them, over the open, 'tis a race with the long-thrown shadows; a race across the heaths and up the hills, till, at the farthest bourne of mounted eastern cloud, the heralds of the sun lay rosy fingers, and rest.

Sweet are the shy recesses of the woodland. The ray treads softly there. A film athwart the pathway quivers many-hued against purple shade fragrant with warm pines, deep moss-beds, feathery ferns. The little brown squirrel drops tail, and leaps: the inmost bird is startled to a chance tuneless note. From silence into silence things move.

Peeps of the revelling splendour above and around enliven the conscious full heart within. The flaming west, the crimson heights, shower their glories through voluminous leafage. But these are bowers where deep bliss

dwells, imperial joy, that owes no fealty to yonder glories in which the young lamb gambols, and the spirits of men are glad. Descend, great Radiance! embrace creation with beneficent fire, and pass from us! You, and the vice-regal light that succeeds to you, and all heavenly pageants, are the ministers and the slaves of the throbbing content within.

For this is the home of the enchantment. Here, secluded from vexed shores, the prince and princess of the island meet; here like darkling nightingales they sit, and into eyes and ears and hands pour endless ever-fresh treasures of their souls.

Roll on, grinding wheels of the world: cries of ships going down in a calm, groans of a System which will not know its rightful hour of exultation, complain to the universe. You are not heard here.

He calls her by her name, Lucy: and she, blushing at her great boldness, has called him by his, Richard. Those two names are the key-notes of the wonderful harmonies the angels sing aloft.

“Lucy! my beloved!”

“O Richard!”

Out in the world there, on the skirts of the woodland, a sheep-boy pipes to meditative eve on a penny-whistle.

Love’s musical instrument is as old, and as poor; it has but two stops; and yet, you see, the cunning musician does thus much with it!

Other speech they have little; light foam playing upon waves of feeling, and of feeling compact, that bursts only when the sweeping volume is too wild, and is no more than their sigh of tenderness spoken.

Perhaps Love played his tune so well because their natures had unblunted

edges, and were keen for bliss, confiding in it as natural food. To gentlemen and ladies, he fine-draws upon the viol, ravishingly; or blows into the mellow bassoon; or rouses the heroic ardours of the trumpet; or, it may be, commands the whole Orchestra for them. And they are pleased. He is still the cunning musician. They languish, and taste ecstasy; but it is, however sonorous, an earthly concert. For them the spheres move not to two notes. They have lost, or forfeited and never known, the first super-sensual spring of the ripe senses into passion; when they carry the soul with them, and have the privileges of spirits to walk disembodied, boundlessly to feel. Or one has it, and the other is a dead body! Ambrosia let them eat, and drink the nectar: here sit a couple to whom Love's simple bread and water is a finer feast.

Pipe, happy sheep-boy, Love! Irradiated angels, unfold your wings and lift your voices!

They have outflown philosophy. Their instinct has shot beyond the ken of science. 'Twere made for this Eden.

"And this divine gift was in store for me!"

So runs the internal outcry of each, clasping each: it is their recurring refrain to the harmonies. How it illumined the years gone by, and suffused the living Future!

"You for me: I for you!"

"We are born for each other!"

They believe that the angels have been busy about them from their cradles. The celestial hosts have worthily striven to bring them together. And, O victory! O wonder! after toil, and pain, and difficulties exceeding, the celestial hosts have succeeded!

"Here we two sit who are written above as one!"

Pipe, happy Love! pipe on to these dear innocents!

The tide of colour has ebbed from the upper-sky. In the west the sea of sunken fire draws back; and the stars leap forth, and tremble, and retire before the advancing moon, who slips the silver train of cloud from her shoulders, and, with her foot upon the pine-tops, surveys heaven.

"Lucy, did you never dream of meeting me?"

"O Richard! yes; for I remembered you."

"Lucy! and did you pray that we might meet?"

"I did!"

Young as when she looked upon the lovers in Paradise, the fair Immortal journeys onward. Fronting her, it is not night but veiled day. Full half the

sky is flushed. Not darkness; not day; but the nuptials of the two.

‘My own! my own forever! You are pledged to me? Whisper!’

He hears the delicious music.

“And you are mine?”

A soft beam travels to the fern-covert under the pine-wood where they sit, and for answer he has her eyes: turned to him an instant, timidly fluttering over the depths of his, and then down-cast; for through her eyes her soul is naked to him.

“Lucy! my bride! my life!”

The night-jar spins his dark monotony on the branch of the pine. The soft beam travels round them, and listens to their hearts. Their lips are locked.

Pipe no more, Love, for a time! Pipe as you will you cannot express their first kiss; nothing of its sweetness, and of the sacredness of it nothing. St.

Cecilia up aloft, before the silver organ-pipes of Paradise, pressing fingers upon all the notes of which Love is but one, from her you may hear it.

So Love is silent. Out in the world there, on the skirts of the woodland, the self-satisfied sheep-boy delivers a last complacent squint down the length of his penny-whistle, and, with a flourish correspondingly wry-faced, he also marches into silence, hailed by supper. The woods are still. There is heard but the night-jar spinning on the pine-branch, circled by moonlight.

*A “Dream-Life”
Love-Story*

BY

DONALD G. MITCHELL

(IK MARVEL)



A “Dream-Life” Love-Story

BY

DONALD G. MITCHELL (IK MARVEL)

I

BOY SENTIMENT

You were all playing together by the big swing; (how plainly it swings in your memory now!) Madge had the seat, and you were famous for running under with a long push, which Madge liked better than anything else;—well, you have half run over the ground when, crash! comes the swing, and poor Madge with it! You fairly scream as you catch her up. But she is not hurt, —only a cry of fright, and a little sprain of that fairy ankle; and as she brushes away the tears and those flaxen curls,

and breaks into a merry laugh,—half at your woe-worn face, and half in vexation at herself,—and leans her hand (such a hand!) upon your shoulder, to limp away into the shade, you dream your first dream of love.

But it is only a dream, not at all acknowledged by you; she is three or four years your junior,—too young altogether. It is very absurd to talk about it. There is nothing to be said of Madge, only—Madge! The name does it.

It is rather a pretty name to write. You are fond of making capital M's; and sometimes you follow them with a capital A. Then you practise a little upon a D, and perhaps back it up with a G. Of course it is the merest accident that these letters come together. It seems funny to you—very. And as a proof that they were made at random, you make a T or an R before

them, and some other quite irrelevant letters after it.

Finally, as a sort of security against all suspicion, you cross it out,—cross it a great many ways, even holding it up to the light to see that there should be no air of intention about it.

. . . You need have no fear, Clarence, that your hieroglyphics will be studied so closely. Accidental as they are, you are very much more interested in them than anyone else.

. . . It is a common fallacy of this dream in most stages of life, that a vast number of persons employ their time chiefly in spying out its operations.

Yet Madge cares nothing about you, that you know of. Perhaps it is the very reason, though you do not suspect it then, why you care so much for her. At any rate she is a friend of Nelly's, and it is your duty not to dislike her. Nelly, too, sweet Nelly, gets an inkling

of matters,—for sisters are very shrewd in suspicions of this sort, shrewder than brothers or fathers,—and, like the good, kind girl that she is, she wishes to humor even your weakness.

Madge drops into tea quite often: Nelly has something *in particular* to show her, two or three times a week. Good Nelly! Perhaps she is making your troubles all the greater. You gather large bunches of grapes for Madge—because she is a friend of Nelly's—which she doesn't want at all, and very pretty bouquets, which she either drops or pulls to pieces.

In the presence of your father one day you drop some hint about Madge in a very careless way,—a way shrewdly calculated to lay all suspicion,—at which your father laughs. This is odd; it makes you wonder if your father was ever in love himself.

You rather think that he has been.

Madge's father is dead, and her mother is poor; and you sometimes dream how—whatever your father may think or feel—you will some day make a large fortune, in some very easy way, and build a snug cottage, and have one horse for your carriage and one for your wife, (not Madge, of course—that is absurd,) and a turtle-shell cat for your wife's mother, and a pretty gate to the front yard, and plenty of shrubbery; and how your wife will come dancing down the path to meet you,—as the Wife does in Mr. Irving's "Sketch-Book,"—and how she will have a harp in the parlor, and will wear white dresses with a blue sash.

. . . Poor Clarence, it never occurs to you that even Madge may grow fat, and wear check aprons, and snuffy-brown dresses of woollen stuff, and twist her hair in yellow papers. Oh, no, boyhood has no such dreams as that!

I shall leave you here in the middle of your first foray into the world of sentiment, with those wicked eyes chasing rainbows over your heart, and those little feet walking every day into your affections. I shall leave you, before the affair has ripened into any overtures, and while there is only a sixpence split in halves, and tied about your neck and Maggie's neck, to bind your destinies together.

If I even hinted at any probability of your marrying her, you would be very likely to dispute me. One knows his own feelings, or thinks he does, so much better than anyone can tell him.

II

MANLY HOPE

You are at home again; not your own home,—that is gone,—but at the home of Nelly and of Frank. The city heats of summer drive you to the country. You ramble, with a little kindling of old desires and memories, over the hill-sides that once bounded your boyish vision. Here you netted the wild rabbits, as they came out at dusk to feed; there, upon that tall chestnut, you cruelly maimed your first captive squirrel. The old maples are even now scarred with the rude cuts you gave them in sappy March.

You sit down upon some height overlooking the valley where you were born; you trace the faint, silvery line

of river; you detect by the leaning elm your old bathing-place upon the Saturdays of summer. Your eye dwells upon some patches of pasture-wood which were famous for their nuts. Your rambling and saddened vision roams over the houses; it traces the familiar chimney-stacks; it searches out the low-lying cottages; it dwells upon the gray roof sleeping yonder under the sycamores.

Tears swell in your eye as you gaze; you cannot tell whence or why they come. Yet they are tears eloquent of feeling. They speak of brother—children,—of boyish glee,—of the flush of young health,—of a mother's devotion,—of the home affections,—of the vanities of life,—of the wasting years,—of the Death that must shroud what friends remain, as it has shrouded what friends have gone,—and possibly of some Great Hope, beaming on your

seared manhood dimly from the upper world.

Your wealth suffices for all the luxuries of life; there is no fear of coming want; health beats strong in your veins; you have learned to hold a place in the world with a man's strength, and a man's confidence. And yet in the view of those sweet scenes which belonged to early days, when neither strength, confidence, nor wealth were yours,—days never to come again,—a shade of melancholy broods upon your spirit, and covers with its veil all that fierce pride which your worldly wisdom has wrought.

You visit again with Frank the country homestead of his grandfather: he is dead; but the old lady still lives; and blind Fanny, now drawing towards womanhood, wears yet through her darkened life the same air of placid content, and of sweet trustfulness in

heaven. The boys, whom you astounded with your stories of books, are building up now with steady industry the queen cities of our new western land. The old clergyman is gone from the desk, and from under his sounding-board; he sleeps beneath a brown stone slab in the churchyard. The stout deacon is dead; his wig and his wickedness rest together. The tall chorister sings yet; but they now have a bass-viol—handled by a new schoolmaster—in place of his tuning-fork; and the years have sown feeble quavers in his voice.

Once more you meet at the home of Nelly the blue-eyed Madge. The sixpence is all forgotten; you cannot certainly tell where your half of it may now be. Yet she is beautiful, just budding into the full ripeness of womanhood. Her eyes have a quiet, still joy, and hope beaming in them, like angels'

looks. Her motions have a native grace and freedom that no culture can bestow. Her words have a gentle earnestness and honesty that could never nurture guile.

You had thought after your gay experiences of the world to meet her with a kind condescension, as an old friend of Nelly's. But there is that in her eye which forbids all thought of condescension. There is that in her air which tells of a high womanly dignity, which can only be met on equal ground. Your pride is piqued. She has known—she must know your history; but it does not tame her. There is no marked and submissive appreciation of your gifts as a man of the world.

She meets your happiest compliments with a very easy indifference; she receives your elegant civilities with a very assured brow. She neither courts your society, nor avoids it. She does

not seek to provoke any special attention. And only when your old self glows in some casual kindness to Nelly, does her look beam with a flush of sympathy.

This look touches you. It makes you ponder on the noble heart that lives in Madge. It makes you wish it were yours. But that is gone. The fervor and the honesty of a glowing youth is swallowed up in the flash and splendor of the world. A half-regret chases over you at nightfall, when solitude pierces you with the swift dart of gone-by memories. But at morning the regret dies in the glitter of ambitious purposes.

The summer months linger; and still you linger with them. Madge is often with Nelly; and Madge is never less than Madge. You venture to point your attentions with a little more fervor; but she meets the fervor with

no glow. She knows too well the habit of your life.

Strange feelings come over you,—feelings like half-forgotten memories,—mystical, dreamy, doubtful. You have seen a hundred faces more brilliant than that of Madge; you have pressed a hundred jewelled hands that have returned a half-pressure to yours. You do not exactly admire; to love you have forgotten; you only—linger.

It is a soft autumn evening, and the harvest-moon is red and round over the eastern skirt of woods. You are attending Madge to that little cottage-home where lives that gentle and doting mother, who in the midst of her country retirement, cherishes that refined delicacy which never comes to a child but by inheritance.

Madge has been passing the day with Nelly. Something—it may be the soft autumn air, wafting towards you the

freshness of young days—moves you to speak as you have not ventured to speak, as your vanity has not allowed you to speak before.

“You remember, Madge, (you have guarded this sole token of boyish intimacy,) our split sixpence?”

“Perfectly;” it is a short word to speak, and there is no tremor in her tone,—not the slightest.

“You have it yet?”

“I dare say I have it somewhere;”—no tremor now; she is very composed.

“That was a happy time;”—very great emphasis on the word happy.

“Very happy;”—no emphasis anywhere.

“I sometimes wish I might live it over again.”

“Yes?”—inquiringly.

“There are, after all, no pleasures in the world like those.”

"No?"—inquiringly again.

You thought you had learned to have language at command; you never thought, after so many years' schooling of the world, that your pliant tongue would play you truant. Yet now you are silent.

The moon steals its silvery way into the light flakes of cloud, and the air is soft as May. The cottage is in sight. Again you risk utterance:

"You must live very happily here."

"I have very kind friends;"—the very is emphasized.

"I am sure Nelly loves you very much."

"Oh, I believe it!"—with great earnestness.

You are at the cottage-door.

"Good-night, Maggie;"—very feelingly.

"Good night, Clarence;"—very kindly; and she draws her hand coyly,

and half tremulously, from your somewhat fevered grasp.

You stroll away dreamily, watching the moon,—running over your fragmentary life,—half moody, half pleased, half hopeful.

You come back stealthily, and with a heart throbbing with a certain wild sense of shame, to watch the light gleaming in the cottage. You linger in the shadows of the trees until you catch a glimpse of her figure gliding past the window. You bear the image home with you. You are silent on your return. You retire early, but you do not sleep early.

. . . If you were only as you were: if it were not too late. If Madge could only love you, as you know she will and must love one manly heart, there would be a world of joy opening before you. But it is too late.

You draw out Nelly to speak of

Madge: Nelly is very prudent. "Madge is a dear girl," she says. Does Nelly even distrust you? It is a sad thing to be too much a man of the world.

You go back again to noisy, ambitious life; you try to drown old memories in its blaze and its vanities. Your lot seems cast beyond all change, and you task yourself with its noisy fulfillment. But amid the silence and the toil of your office-hours, a strange desire broods over your spirit,—a desire for more of manliness,—that manliness which feels itself a protector of loving and trustful innocence.

You look around upon the faces in which you have smiled unmeaning smiles: there is nothing there to feed your dawning desires. You meet with those ready to court you by flattering your vanity, by retailing the praises of what you may do well, by odious familiarity, by brazen proffer of friendship,

but you see in it all only the emptiness and the vanity which you have studied to enjoy.

Sickness comes over you, and binds you for weary days and nights,—in which life hovers doubtfully, and the lips babble secrets that you cherish. It is astonishing how disease clips a man from the artificialities of the world. Lying lonely upon his bed, moaning, writhing, suffering, his soul joins on to the universe of souls by only natural bonds. The factitious ties of wealth, of place, of reputation, vanish from the bleared eyes; and the earnest heart, deep under all, craves only heartiness.

The old longing of the office silence comes back,—not with the proud wish only of being a protector, but—of being protected. And whatever may be the trust in that beneficent Power who “chasteneth whom he loveth,” there is yet an earnest, human yearning to—

wards some one, whose love—most, and whose duty—least, would call her to your side; whose soft hands would cool the fever of yours, whose step would wake a throb of joy, whose voice would tie you to life, and whose presence would make the worst of Death—an Adieu!

As you gain strength once more, you go back to Nelly's home. Her kindness does not falter; every care and attention belong to you there. Again your eye rests upon that figure of Madge, and upon her face, wearing an even gentler expression as she sees you sitting pale and feeble by the old hearth-stone. She brings flowers—for Nelly: you beg Nelly to place them upon the little table at your side. It is as yet the only taste of the country that you can enjoy. You love those flowers.

After a time you grow strong, and

walk in the fields. You linger until nightfall. You pass by the cottage where Madge lives. It is your pleasantest walk. The trees are greenest in that direction; the shadows are softest; the flowers are thickest.

It is strange—this feeling in you. It is not the feeling you had for Laura Dalton. It does not even remind of that. That was an impulse, but this is growth. That was strong, but this is strength. You catch sight of her little notes to Nelly; you read them over and over; you treasure them; you learn them by heart. There is something in the very writing that touches you.

You bid her adieu with tones of kindness that tremble,—and that meet a half-trembling tone in reply. She is very good.

. . . If it were not too late!

III

MANLY LOVE

And shall pride yield at length?

. . . Pride!—and what has love to do with pride? Let us see how it is.

Madge is not rich; she is not schooled in the arts of the world. You have wealth; you are met respectfully by the veterans of fashion; you have gained perhaps a kind of brilliancy of position.

Would it then be a condescension to love Madge? Dare you ask yourself such a question? Do you not know—in spite of your worldliness—that the man or the woman, who *condescends* to love, never loves in earnest?

But again Madge is possessed of a purity, a delicacy, and a dignity that lift her far above you,—that make you feel your weakness and your unworthi-

ness; and it is the deep and the mortifying sense of this unworthiness that makes you bolster yourself upon your pride. You *know* that you do yourself honor in loving such grace and goodness; you know that you would be honored tenfold more than you deserve in being loved by so much grace and goodness.

It scarce seems to you possible; it is a joy too great to be hoped for; and in the doubt of its attainment your old, worldly vanity comes in, and tells you to—beware; and to live on in the splendor of your dissipation and in the lusts of your selfish habit. Yet still underneath all there is a deep, low voice,—quickened from above,—which assures you that you are capable of better things; that you are not wholly recreant; that a mine of unstarted tenderness still lies smouldering in your soul.

And with this sense quickening your better nature, you venture the wealth of your whole emotional nature upon the hope that now blazes on your path.

. . . You are seated at your desk, working with such zeal of labor as your ambitious projects never could command. It is a letter to Margaret Boyne that so tasks your love, and makes the veins upon your forehead swell with the earnestness of the employ.

. . . "Dear Madge,—May I not call you thus, if only in memory of our childish affections; and might I dare to hope that a riper affection, which your character has awakened, may permit me to call you thus—always?

"If I have not ventured to speak, dear Madge, will you not believe that the consciousness of my own ill-desert has tied my tongue; will you not at least give me credit for a little remaining modesty of heart? You know my

life, and you know my character,— what a sad jumble of errors and of misfortunes have belonged to each. You know the careless and the vain purposes which have made me recreant to the better nature which belonged to that sunny childhood, when we lived and grew up together. And will you not believe me when I say, that your grace of character and kindness of heart have drawn me back from the follies in which I lived, and quickened new desires which I thought to be wholly dead? Can I indeed hope that you will overlook all that has gained your secret reproaches, and confide in a heart which is made conscious of better things by the love you have inspired?

“Ah, Madge, it is not with a vain show of words, or with any counterfeit of feeling, that I write now; you know it is not; you know that my heart is

leaning towards you with the freshness of its noblest instincts; you know that—I love you!

“Can I, dare I hope, that it is not spoken in vain? I had thought in my pride never to make such avowal,—never again to sue for affection; but your gentleness, your modesty, your virtues of life and heart have conquered me. I am sure you will treat me with the generosity of a victor.

“You know of my weaknesses; I would not conceal from you a single one,—even to win you. I can offer nothing to you which will bear comparison in value with what is yours to bestow. I can only offer this strong hand of mine—to guard you; and this fond heart—to love you!

“Am I rash? Am I extravagant in word, or in hope? Forgive it then, dear Madge, for the sake of our old childish affection; and believe me, when

I say, that what is here written—is written honestly. Adieu.”

It is with no fervor of boyish passion that you fold this letter: it is with the trembling hand of eager and earnest manhood. They tell you that man is not capable of love: so the September sun is not capable of warmth! It may not, indeed, be so fierce as that of July; but it is steadier. It does not force great flaunting leaves into breadth and succulence, but it matures whole harvests of plenty.

There is a deep and earnest soul pervading the reply of Madge that makes it sacred; it is full of delicacy, and full of hope. Yet it is not final. Her heart lies intrenched within the ramparts of Duty and of Devotion. It is a citadel of strength in the middle of the city of her affections. To win the way to it, there must be not only earnestness of love, but earnestness of life.

Weeks roll by, and other letters pass and are answered—a glow of warmth beaming on either side.

You are again at the home of Nelly; she is very joyous; she is the confidante of Madge. Nelly feels, that with all your errors you have enough inner goodness to make Madge happy; and she feels—doubly—that Madge has such excess of goodness as will cover your heart with joy. Yet she tells you very little. She will give you no full assurance of the love of Madge; she leaves that for yourself to win.

She will even tease you in her pleasant way, until hope almost changes to despair, and your brow grows pale with the dread—that even now your unworthiness may condemn you.

It is summer weather; and you have been walking over the hills of home with Madge and Nelly. Nelly has found some excuse to leave you,—

glancing at you most teasingly as she hurries away.

You are left sitting with Madge upon a bank tufted with blue violets. You have been talking of the days of childhood, and some word has called up the old chain of boyish feeling, and joined it to your new hope.

What you would say crowds too fast for utterance; and you abandon it. But you take from your pocket that little, broken bit of sixpence,—which you have found after long search,—and without a word, but with a look that tells your inmost thought, you lay it in the half-opened hand of Madge.

She looks at you with a slight suffusion of color, seems to hesitate a moment,—raises her other hand, and draws from her bosom by a bit of blue ribbon a little locket. She touches a spring, and there falls beside your

relique—another, that had once belonged to it.

Hope glows now like the sun.

. . . "And you have worn this, Maggie?"

. . . "Always!"

"Dear Madge!"

"Dear Clarence!"

. . . And you pass your arm now, unchecked, around that yielding, graceful figure, and fold her to your bosom with the swift and blessed assurance that your fullest and noblest dream of love is won.

*The Sire de Malétroit's
Door*

BY

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

The Sire de Malétroit's Door

BY

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Denis de Beaulieu was not yet two-and-twenty, but he counted himself a grown man, and a very accomplished cavalier into the bargain. Lads were early formed in that rough, warfaring epoch; and when one had been in a pitched battle and a dozen raids, has killed one's man in an honourable fashion, and knows a thing or two of strategy and mankind, a certain swagger in the gait is surely to be pardoned. He had put up his horse with due care, and supped with due deliberation; and then, in a very agreeable frame of mind, went out to pay a visit in the grey of the evening. It was not a very wise proceeding on the young man's

part. He would have done better to remain beside the fire or go decently to bed. For the town was full of the troops of Burgundy and England under a mixed command; and though Denis was there on safe-conduct, his safe-conduct was like to serve him little on a chance encounter.

It was September, 1429; the weather had fallen sharp; a flighty piping wind, laden with showers, beat about the township; and the dead leaves ran riot along the streets. Here and there a window was already lighted up; and the noise of men-at-arms making merry over supper within, came forth in fits and was swallowed up and carried away by the wind. The night fell swiftly; the flag of England, fluttering on the spire-top, grew ever fainter and fainter against the flying clouds—a black speck like a swallow in the tumultuous, leaden chaos of the sky. As the

night fell the wind rose, and began to hoot under archways and roar amid the tree-tops in the valley below the town.

Denis de Beaulieu walked fast and was soon knocking at his friend's door; but though he promised himself to stay only a little while and make an early return, his welcome was so pleasant, and he found so much to delay him, that it was already long past midnight before he said good-bye upon the threshold. The wind had fallen again in the meanwhile; the night was as black as the grave; not a star, nor a glimmer of moonshine, slipped through the canopy of cloud. Denis was ill-acquainted with the intricate lanes of Chateau Landon; even by daylight he had found some trouble in picking his way; and in this absolute darkness he soon lost it altogether. He was certain of one thing only—to keep mounting the hill; for his friend's house lay at

the lower end, or tail, of Chateau Landon, while the inn was up at the head, under the great church spire. With this clue to go upon he stumbled and groped forward, now breathing more freely in open places where there was a good slice of sky overhead, now feeling along the wall in stifling closes. It is an eerie and mysterious position to be thus submerged in opaque blackness in an almost unknown town. The silence is terrifying in its possibilities. The touch of cold window bars to the exploring hand startles the man like the touch of a toad; the inequalities of the pavement shake his heart into his mouth; a piece of denser darkness threatens an ambushade or a chasm in the pathway; and where the air is brighter, the houses put on strange and bewildering appearances, as if to lead him farther from his way. For Denis, who had to regain his inn without

attracting notice, there was real danger as well as mere discomfort in the walk; and he went warily and boldly at once, and at every corner paused to make an observation.

He had been for some time threading a lane so narrow that he could touch a wall with either hand when it began to open out and go sharply downward. Plainly this lay no longer in the direction of his inn; but the hope of a little more light tempted him forward to reconnoitre. The lane ended in a terrace with a bartizan wall, which gave an outlook between high houses, as out of an embrasure, into the valley lying dark and formless several hundred feet below. Denis looked down, and could discern a few tree tops waving and a single speck of brightness where the river ran across a weir. The weather was clearing up, and the sky had lightened, so as to show the outline of the

heavier clouds and the dark margin of the hills. By the uncertain glimmer, the house on his left hand should be a place of some pretensions; it was surmounted by several pinnacles and turret-tops; the round stern of a chapel, with a fringe of flying buttresses, projected boldly from the main block; and the door was sheltered under a deep porch carved with figures and overhung by two long gargoyles. The windows of the chapel gleamed through their intricate tracery with a light as of many tapers, and threw out the buttresses and the peaked roof in a more intense blackness against the sky. It was plainly the hotel of some great family of the neighbourhood; and as it reminded Denis of a town house of his own at Bourges, he stood for some time gazing up at it and mentally gauging the skill of the architects and the consideration of the two families.

There seemed to be no issue to the terrace but the lane by which he had reached it; he could only retrace his steps, but he had gained some notion of his whereabouts, and hoped by this means to hit the main thoroughfare and speedily regain the inn. He was reckoning without that chapter of accidents which was to make this night memorable above all others in his career; for he had not gone back above a hundred yards before he saw a light coming to meet him, and heard loud voices speaking together in the echoing narrows of the lane. It was a party of men-at-arms going the night round with torches. Denis assured himself that they had all been making free with the wine-bowl, and were in no mood to be particular about safe-conducts or the niceties of chivalrous war. It was as like as not that they would kill him like a dog and leave him where he fell. The

situation was inspiriting but nervous. Their own torches would conceal him from sight, he reflected; and he hoped that they would drown the noise of his footsteps with their own empty voices. If he were but fleet and silent, he might evade their notice altogether.

Unfortunately, as he turned to beat a retreat, his foot rolled upon a pebble; he fell against the wall with an ejaculation, and his sword rang loudly on the stones. Two or three voices demanded who went there—some in French, some in English; but Denis made no reply, and ran the faster down the lane. Once upon the terrace he paused to look back. They still kept calling after him, and just then began to double pace in pursuit, with a considerable clank of armour, and great tossing of the torchlight to and fro in the narrow jaws of the passage.

Denis cast a look around and darted

into the porch. There he might escape observation, or—if that were too much to expect—was in a capital posture whether for parley or defense. So thinking, he drew his sword and tried to set his back against the door. To his surprise, it yielded behind his weight; and though he turned in a moment, continued to swing back on oiled and noiseless hinges, until it stood wide open on a black interior. When things fall out opportunely for the person concerned, he is not apt to be critical about the how or why, his own immediate personal convenience seeming a sufficient reason for the strangest oddities and revolutions in our sublunary things; and so Denis, without a moment's hesitation, stepped within and partly closed the door behind him to conceal his place of refuge. Nothing was further from his thoughts than to close it altogether; but for some

inexplicable reason—perhaps by a spring or a weight—the ponderous mass of oak whipped itself out of his fingers and clanked to, with a formidable rumble and a noise like the falling of an automatic bar.

The round, at that very moment, debouched upon the terrace and proceeded to summon him with shouts and curses. He heard them ferreting in the dark corners; the stock of a lance even rattled along the outer surface of the door behind which he stood; but these gentlemen were in too high a humour to be long delayed, and soon made off down a corkscrew pathway which had escaped Denis's observation, and passed out of sight and hearing along the battlements of the town.

Denis breathed again. He gave them a few minutes' grace for fear of accidents, and then groped about for some

means of opening the door and slipping forth again. The inner surface was quite smooth, not a handle, not a moulding, not a projection of any sort. He got his finger-nails round the edges and pulled, but the mass was immovable. He shook it; it was as firm as a rock. Denis de Beaulieu frowned and gave vent to a little noiseless whistle. What ailed the door? he wondered. Why was it open? How came it to shut so easily and so effectually after him? There was something obscure and underhand about all this, that was little to the young man's fancy. It looked like a snare; and yet who could suppose a snare in such a quiet by-street and in a house of so prosperous and even noble an exterior? And yet—snare or no snare, intentionally or unintentionally—here he was, prettily trapped; and for the life of him he could see no way out of it again. The

darkness began to weigh upon him. He gave ear; all was silent without, but within and close by ~~he~~ seemed to catch a faint sighing, a faint sobbing rustle, a little stealthy creak—as though many persons were at his side, holding themselves quite still, and governing even their respiration with the extreme of slyness. The idea went to his vitals with a shock, and he faced about suddenly as if to defend his life. Then, for the first time, he became aware of a light about the level of his eyes and at some distance in the interior of the house — a vertical thread of light, widening towards the bottom, such as might escape between two wings of arras over a doorway. To see anything was a relief to Denis; it was like a piece of solid ground to a man labouring in a morass; his mind seized upon it with avidity; and he stood staring at it and trying to piece together

some logical conception of his surroundings. Plainly there was a flight of steps ascending from his own level to that of this illuminated doorway; and indeed he thought he could make out another thread of light, as fine as a needle and as faint as phosphorescence, which might very well be reflected along the polished wood of a handrail. Since he had begun to suspect that he was not alone, his heart had continued to beat with smothering violence, and an intolerable desire for action of any sort had possessed itself of his spirit. He was in deadly peril, he believed. What could be more natural than to mount the staircase, lift the curtain, and confront his difficulty at once? At least he would be dealing with something tangible; at least he would be no longer in the dark. He stepped slowly forward with outstretched hands, until his foot struck

the bottom step; then he rapidly scaled the stairs, stood for a moment to compose his expression, lifted the arras, and went in.

He found himself in a large apartment of polished stone. There were three doors; one on each of three sides; all similarly curtained with tapestry. The fourth side was occupied by two large windows and a great stone chimney-piece, carved with the arms of the Malétroits. Denis recognized the bearings, and was gratified to find himself in such good hands. The room was strongly illuminated; but it contained little furniture except a heavy table and a chair or two, the hearth was innocent of fire, and the pavement was but sparsely strewn with rushes clearly many days old.

On a high chair beside the chimney, and directly facing Denis as he entered, sat a little old gentleman in a

fur tippet. He sat with his legs crossed and his hands folded, and a cup of spiced wine stood by his elbow on a bracket on the wall. His countenance had a strongly masculine cast; not properly human, but such as we see in the bull, the goat, or the domestic boar; something equivocal and wheedling, something greedy, brutal, and dangerous. The upper lip was inordinately full, as though swollen by a blow or a toothache; and the smile, the peaked eyebrows, and the small, strong eyes were quaintly and almost comically evil in expression. Beautiful white hair hung straight all round his head, like a saint's, and fell in a single curl upon the tippet. His beard and moustache were the pink of venerable sweetness. Age, probably in consequence of inordinate precautions, had left no mark upon his hands; and the Malétroit hand was famous. It would

be difficult to imagine anything at once so fleshy and so delicate in design; the taper, sensual fingers were like those of one of Leonardo's women; the fork of the thumb made a dimpled protuberance when closed; the nails were perfectly shaped, and of a dead, surprising whiteness. It rendered his aspect tenfold more redoubtable, that a man with hands like these should keep them devoutly folded like a virgin martyr—that a man with so intent and startling an expression of face should sit patiently on his seat and contemplate people with an unwinking stare, like a god, or a god's statue. His quiescence seemed ironical and treacherous, it fitted so poorly with his looks.

Such was Alain, Sire de Malétroit.

Denis and he looked silently at each other for a second or two.

"Pray step in," said the Sire de

Malétroit. "I have been expecting you all the evening."

He had not risen, but he accompanied his words with a smile and a slight but courteous inclination of the head. Partly from the smile, partly from the strange musical murmur with which the Sire prefaced his observation, Denis felt a strong shudder of disgust go through his marrow. And what with disgust and honest confusion of mind he could scarcely get words together in reply.

"I fear," he said, "that this is a double accident. I am not the person you suppose me. It seems you were looking for a visit; but for my part, nothing was further from my thoughts—nothing could be more contrary to my wishes—than this intrusion."

"Well, well," replied the old gentleman indulgently, "here you are, which is the main point. Seat yourself, my

L. of C.

friend, and put yourself entirely at your ease. We shall arrange our little affairs presently."

Denis perceived that the matter was still complicated with some misconception, and he hastened to continue his explanations.

"Your door . . ." he began.

"About my door?" asked the other, raising his peaked eyebrows. "A little piece of ingenuity." And he shrugged his shoulders. "A hospitable fancy! By your own account, you were not desirous of making my acquaintance. We old people look for such reluctance now and then; when it touches our honour, we cast about until we find some way of overcoming it. You arrive uninvited, but believe me, very welcome."

"You persist in error, sir," said Denis. "There can be no question between you and me. I am a stranger in this coun-

tryside. My name is Denis, damoiseau de Beaulieu. If you see me in your house, it is only——”

“My young friend,” interrupted the other, “you will permit me to have my own ideas on that subject. They probably differ from yours at the present moment,” he added with a leer, “but time will show which of us is in the right.”

Denis was convinced he had to do with a lunatic. He seated himself with a shrug, content to wait the upshot; and a pause ensued, during which he thought he could distinguish a hurried gabbling as of prayer from behind the arras immediately opposite him. Sometimes there seemed to be but one person engaged, sometimes two; and the vehemence of the voice, low as it was, seemed to indicate either great haste or an agony of spirit. It occurred to him that this piece of tapestry covered

the entrance to the chapel he had noticed from without.

The old gentleman meanwhile surveyed Denis from head to foot with a smile, and from time to time emitted little noises like a bird or a mouse, which seemed to indicate a high degree of satisfaction. This state of matters became rapidly insupportable; and Denis, to put an end to it, remarked politely that the wind had gone down.

The old gentleman fell into a fit of silent laughter, so prolonged and violent that he became quite red in the face. Denis got upon his feet at once, and put on his hat with a flourish.

"Sir," he said, "if you are in your wits, you have affronted me grossly. If you are out of them, I flatter myself I can find better employment for my brains than to talk to lunatics. My conscience is clear; you have refused to hear my explanations; and now there

is no power under God will make me stay here any longer; and if I cannot make my way out in a more decent fashion, I will hack your door to pieces with my sword."

The Sire de Malétroit raised his right hand and wagged it at Denis with the fore and little fingers extended.

"My dear nephew," he said, "sit down."

"Nephew!" retorted Denis, "you lie in your throat;" and he snapped his fingers in his face.

"Sit down, you rogue!" cried the old gentleman, in a sudden, harsh voice, like the barking of a dog. "Do you fancy," he went on, "that when I had made my little contrivance for the door I had stopped short with that? If you prefer to be bound hand and foot till your bones ache, rise and try to go away. If you choose to remain a free young buck, agreeably conversing with

an old gentleman — why, sit where you are in peace, and God be with you.”

“Do you mean I am a prisoner?” demanded Denis.

“I state the facts,” replied the other. “I would rather leave the conclusion to yourself.”

Denis sat down again. Externally he managed to keep pretty calm, but within, he was now boiling with anger, now chilled with apprehension. He no longer felt convinced that he was dealing with a madman. And if the old gentleman was sane, what, in God’s name, had he to look for? What absurd or tragical adventure had befallen him? What countenance was he to assume?

While he was thus unpleasantly reflecting, the arras that overhung the chapel door was raised and a tall priest in his robes came forth and, giving a

long, keen stare at Denis, said something in an undertone to the Sire de Malétroit.

"She is in a better frame of spirit?" asked the latter.

"She is more resigned, messire," replied the priest.

"Now the Lord help her, she is hard to please!" sneered the old gentleman. "A likely stripling—not ill-born—and of her own choosing, too? Why, what more would the jade have?"

"The situation is not usual for a young damsel," said the other, "and somewhat trying to her blushes."

"She should have thought of that before she began the dance! It was none of my choosing, God knows that: but since she is in it, by our lady, she shall carry it to the end." And then addressing Denis, "Monsieur de Beau-lieu," he asked, "may I present you to my niece? She has been waiting your

arrival, I may say, with even greater impatience than myself."

Denis had resigned himself with a good grace—all he desired was to know the worst of it as speedily as possible; so he rose at once, and bowed in acquiescence. The Sire de Malétroit followed his example and limped, with the assistance of the chaplain's arm, towards the chapel-door. The priest pulled aside the arras, and all three entered. The building had considerable architectural pretensions. A light groining sprang from six stout columns, and hung down in two rich pendants from the centre of the vault. The place terminated behind the altar in a round end, embossed and honeycombed with a superfluity of ornament in relief, and pierced by many little windows shaped like stars, trefoils, or wheels. These windows were imperfectly glazed, so that the night air circulated freely in

the chapel. The tapers, of which there must have been half a hundred burning on the altar, were unmercifully blown about; and the light went through many different phases of brilliancy and semi-eclipse. On the steps in front of the altar knelt a young girl richly attired as a bride. A chill settled over Denis as he observed her costume; he fought with desperate energy against the conclusion that was being thrust upon his mind; it could not—it should not—be as he feared.

“Blanche,” said the Sire, in his most flute-like tones, “I have brought a friend to see you, my little girl; turn round and give him your pretty hand. It is good to be devout; but it is necessary to be polite, my niece.”

The girl rose to her feet and turned towards the new comers. She moved all of a piece; and shame and exhaustion were expressed in every line of her

fresh young body; and she held her head down and kept her eyes upon the pavement, as she came slowly forward. In the course of her advance, her eyes fell upon Denis de Beaulieu's feet—feet of which he was justly vain, be it remarked, and wore in the most elegant accoutrement even while travelling. She paused—started, as if his yellow boots had conveyed some shocking meaning—and glanced suddenly up into the wearer's countenance. Their eyes met; shame gave place to horror and terror in her looks; the blood left her lips; with a piercing scream she covered her face with her hands and sank upon the chapel floor.

"That is not the man!" she cried.
"My uncle, that is not the man!"

The Sire de Malétroit chirped agreeably. "Of course not," he said, "I expected as much. It was so unfortunate you could not remember his name."

"Indeed," she cried, "I have never seen this person till this moment—I have never so much as set eyes upon him—I never wish to see him again. Sir," she said, turning to Denis, "if you are a gentleman, you will bear me out. Have I ever seen you—have you ever seen me—before this accursed hour?"

"To speak for myself, I have never had that pleasure," answered the young man. "This is the first time, messire, that I have met with your engaging niece."

The old gentleman shrugged his shoulders.

"I am distressed to hear it," he said. "But it is never too late to begin. I had little more acquaintance with my own late lady ere I married her; which proves," he added, with a grimace, "that these impromptu marriages may often produce an excellent understanding in the long run. As the bride-

groom is to have a voice in the matter, I will give him two hours to make up for lost time before we proceed with the ceremony." And he turned towards the door, followed by the clergyman.

The girl was on her feet in a moment. "My uncle, you cannot be in earnest," she said. "I declare before God I will stab myself rather than be forced on that young man. The heart rises at it; God forbids such marriages; you dishonour your white hair. Oh, my uncle, pity me! There is not a woman in all the world but would prefer death to such a nuptial. Is it possible," she added, faltering—"is it possible that you do not believe me—that you will think this"—and she pointed at Denis with a tremour of anger and contempt—"that you still think *this* to be the man?"

"Frankly," said the old gentleman, pausing on the threshold, "I do. But let me explain to you once for all,

Blanche de Malétroit, my way of thinking about this affair. When you took it into your head to dishonour my family and the name that I have borne, in peace and war, for more than three-score years, you forfeited, not only the right to question my designs, but that of looking me in the face. If your father had been alive, he would have spat on you and turned you out of doors. His was the hand of iron. You may bless your God you have only to deal with the hand of velvet, mademoiselle. It was my duty to get you married without delay. Out of pure good-will, I have tried to find your own gallant for you. And I believe I have succeeded. But before God and all the holy angels, Blanche de Malétroit, if I have not, I care not one jack-straw. So let me recommend you to be polite to our young friend; for upon my word, your next groom may be less appetizing."

And with that he went out, with the chaplain at his heels; and the arras fell behind the pair.

The girl turned upon Denis with flashing eyes.

"And what, sir," she demanded, "may be the meaning of all this?"

"God knows," returned Denis, gloomily. "I am a prisoner in this house, which seems full of mad people. More I know not; and nothing do I understand."

"And pray how came you here?" she asked.

He told her as briefly as he could. "For the rest," he added, "perhaps you will follow my example, and tell me the answer to all these riddles, and what, in God's name, is like to be the end of it."

She stood silent for a little, and he could see her lips tremble and her tearless eyes burn with a feverish lustre.

Then she pressed her forehead in both hands.

“Alas, how my head aches!” she said, wearily—“to say nothing of my poor heart! But it is due you to know my story, unmaidenly as it must seem. I am called Blanche de Malétroit; I have been without father or mother for—oh! for as long as I can recollect, and indeed I have been most unhappy all my life. Three months ago a young captain began to stand near me every day in church. I could see that I pleased him; I am much to blame, but I was so glad that anyone should love me; and when he passed me a letter, I took it home with me and read it with great pleasure. Since that time he has written many. He was so anxious to speak with me, poor fellow! and kept asking me to leave the door open some evening that we might have two words upon the stair. For he knew how much my

uncle trusted me." She gave something like a sob at that, and it was a moment before she could go on. "My uncle is a hard man, but he is very shrewd," she said at last. "He has performed many feats in war, and was a great person at court, and much trusted by Queen Isabeau in old days. How he came to suspect me I cannot tell; but it is hard to keep anything from his knowledge; and this morning, as we came from mass, he took my hand into his, forced it open, and read my little billet, walking by my side all the while. When he finished, he gave it back to me with great politeness. It contained another request to have the door left open; and this has been the ruin of us all. My uncle kept me strictly in my room until evening, and then ordered me to dress myself as you see me—a hard mockery for a young girl, do you not think so? I suppose, when he

could not prevail with me to tell the young captain's name, he must have laid a trap for him; into which, alas! you have fallen in the anger of God. I looked for much confusion; for how could I tell whether he was willing to take me for his wife on these sharp terms? He might have been trifling with me from the first; or I might have made myself too cheap in his eyes. But truly I had not looked for such a shameful punishment as this! I could not think that God would let a girl be so disgraced before a young man. And now I tell you all; and I can scarcely hope that you will not despise me."

Denis made her a respectful inclination.

"Madam," he said, "you have honoured me by your confidence. It remains for me to prove that I am not unworthy of the honour. Is Messire de Malétroit at hand?"

"I believe he is writing in the salle without," she answered.

"May I lead you thither, madam?" asked Denis, offering his hand with his most courtly bearing.

She accepted it; and the pair passed out of the chapel, Blanche in a very drooping and shamefast condition, but Denis strutting and ruffling in the consciousness of a mission, and the boyish certainty of accomplishing it with honour.

The Sire de Malétroit rose to meet them with an ironical obeisance.

"Sir," said Denis, with the grandest possible air, "I believe I am to have some say in the matter of this marriage; and let me tell you at once, I will be no party to forcing the inclination of this young lady. Had it been freely offered to me, I should have been proud to accept her hand, for I perceive she is as good as she is beautiful; but as things

are, I have now the honour, messire, of refusing."

Blanche looked at him with gratitude in her eyes; but the old gentleman only smiled and smiled, until his smile grew positively sickening to Denis.

"I am afraid," he said, "Monsieur de Beaulieu, that you do not perfectly understand the choice I have offered you. Follow me, I beseech you, to this window." And he led the way to one of the large windows which stood open on the night. "You observe," he went on, "there is an iron ring in the upper masonry, and reeved through that, a very efficacious rope. Now, mark my words: if you should find your disinclination to my niece's person insurmountable, I shall have you hanged out of this window before sunrise. I shall only proceed to such an extremity with the greatest regret, you may believe me. For it is not at all your

death that I desire, but my niece's establishment in life. At the same time, it must come to that if you prove obstinate. Your family, Monsieur de Beaulieu, is very well in its way; but if you sprang from Charlemagne, you should not refuse the hand of a Malé-troit with impunity—not if she had been as common as the Paris road—not if she were as hideous as the gargoyle over my door. Neither my niece nor you, nor my own private feelings, move me at all in this matter. The honour of my house has been compromised; I believe you to be the guilty person, at least you are now in the secret; and you can hardly wonder if I request you to wipe out the stain. If you will not, your blood be on your own head! It will be no great satisfaction to me to have your interesting relics kicking their heels in the breeze below my windows, but half a loaf is better than no

-

bread, and if I cannot cure the dishonour, I shall at least stop the scandal."

There was a pause.

"I believe there are other ways of settling such imbroglios among gentlemen," said Denis. "You wear a sword, and I hear you have used it with distinction."

The Sire de Malétroit made a signal to the chaplain, who crossed the room with long, silent strides and raised the arras over the third of the three doors. It was only a moment before he let it fall again; but Denis had time to see a dusky passage full of armed men.

"When I was a little younger I should have been delighted to honour you, Monsieur de Beaulieu," said Sire Alain; "but I am now too old. Faithful retainers are the sinews of age, and I must employ the strength I have. This is one of the hardest things to swallow as a man grows up in years;

but with a little patience, even this becomes habitual. You and the lady seem to prefer the salle for what remains of your two hours; and as I have no desire to cross your preference, I shall resign it to your use with all the pleasure of the world. No haste!" he added, holding up his hand, as he saw a dangerous look come into Denis de Beaulieu's face. "If your mind revolt against hanging, it will be time enough two hours hence to throw yourself out of the window or upon the pikes of my retainers. Two hours of life are always two hours. A great many things may turn up in even as little a while as that. And besides, if I understand her appearance, my niece has something to say to you. You will not disfigure your last hours by want of politeness to a lady?"

Denis looked at Blanche, and she made him an imploring gesture.

It is likely that the old gentleman was hugely pleased at this symptom of an understanding; for he smiled on both, and added sweetly: "If you will give me your word of honour, Monsieur de Beaulieu, to await my return at the end of two hours before attempting anything desperate, I shall withdraw my retainers, and let you speak in greater privacy with mademoiselle."

Denis again glanced at the girl, who seemed to beseech him to agree.

"I give you my word of honour," he said.

Messire de Malétroit bowed, and proceeded to limp about the apartment, clearing his throat the while with that odd musical chirp which had already grown so irritating in the ears of Denis de Beaulieu. He first possessed himself of some papers which lay upon the table; then he went to the mouth of the passage and appeared to give an

order to the men behind the arras; and lastly he hobbled out through the door by which Denis had come in, turning upon the threshold to address a last smiling bow to the young couple, and followed by the chaplain with a hand-lamp.

No sooner were they alone than Blanche advanced towards Denis with her hands extended. Her face was flushed and excited, and her eyes shone with tears.

"You shall not die!" she cried, "you shall marry me after all."

"You seem to think, madam," replied Denis, "that I stand much in fear of death."

"Oh, no, no," she said, "I see you are no poltroon. It is for my own sake—I could not bear to have you slain for such a scruple."

"I am afraid," returned Denis, "that you underrate the difficulty, madam.

What you may be too generous to refuse, I may be too proud to accept. In a moment of noble feeling towards me, you forget what you perhaps owe to others."

He had the decency to keep his eyes on the floor as he said this, and after he had finished, so as not to spy upon her confusion. She stood silent for a moment, then walked suddenly away, and falling on her uncle's chair, fairly burst out sobbing. Denis was in the acme of embarrassment. He looked round, as if to seek for inspiration, and seeing a stool, plumped down upon it for something to do. There he sat playing with the guard of his rapier, and wishing himself dead a thousand times over, and buried in the nastiest kitchen-heap in France. His eyes wandered round the apartment, but found nothing to arrest them. There were such wide spaces between the

furniture, the light fell so badly and cheerlessly over all, the dark outside air looked in so coldly through the windows, that he thought he had never seen a church so vast, nor a tomb so melancholy. The regular sobs of Blanche de Malétroit measured out the time like the ticking of a clock. He read the device upon the shield over and over again, until his eyes became obscured; he stared into shadowy corners until he imagined they were swarming with horrible animals; and every now and again he awoke with a start, to remember that his last two hours were running, and death was on the march.

Oftener and oftener, as the time went on, did his glance settle on the girl herself. Her face was bowed forward and covered with her hands, and she was shaken at intervals by the convulsive hiccup of grief. Even thus she was not

an unpleasant object to dwell upon, so plump and yet so fine, with a warm brown skin, and the most beautiful hair, Denis thought, in the whole world of womankind. Her hands were like her uncle's: but they were more in place at the end of her young arms, and looked infinitely soft and caressing. He remembered how her blue eyes had shone upon him, full of anger, pity, and innocence. And the more he dwelt on her perfections, the uglier death looked, and the more deeply was he smitten with penitence at her continued tears. Now he felt that no man could have the courage to leave a world which contained so beautiful a creature; and now he would have given forty minutes of his last hour to have unsaid his cruel speech.

Suddenly a hoarse and ragged peal of cockcrow rose to their ears from the dark valley below the windows. And

this shattering noise in the silence of all around was like a light in a dark place, and shook them both out of their reflections.

"Alas, can I do nothing to help you?" she said, looking up.

"Madam," replied Denis, with a fine irrelevancy, "if I have said anything to wound you, believe me, it was for your own sake and not for mine."

She thanked him with a tearful look.

"I feel your position cruelly," he went on. "The world has been bitter hard on you. Your uncle is a disgrace to mankind. Believe me, madam, there is no young gentleman in all France but would be glad of my opportunity, to die in doing you a momentary service."

"I know already that you can be very brave and generous," she answered. "What I *want* to know is whether I can serve you—now or afterwards," she added with a quaver.

"Most certainly," he answered with a smile. "Let me sit beside you as if I were a friend, instead of a foolish intruder; try to forget how awkwardly we are placed to one another; make my last moments go pleasantly; and you will do me the chief service possible."

"You are very gallant," she added, with a yet deeper sadness . . . "very gallant . . . and it somehow pains me. But draw nearer, if you please; and if you find anything to say to me, you will at least make certain of a very friendly listener. Ah! Monsieur de Beaulieu," she broke forth—"ah, Monsieur de Beaulieu, how can I look you in the face?" And she fell to weeping again with a renewed effusion.

"Madam," said Denis, taking her hand in both of his, "reflect on the little time I have before me, and the great bitterness into which I am cast by the sight of your distress. Spare me, in my

last moments, the spectacle of what I cannot cure even with the sacrifice of my life."

"I am very selfish," answered Blanche. "I will be braver, Monsieur de Beaulieu, for your sake. But think if I can do you no kindness in the future—if you have no friends to whom I could carry your adieux. Charge me as heavily as you can; every burden will lighten, by so little, the invaluable gratitude I owe you. Put it in my power to do something more for you than weep."

"My mother is married again, and has a young family to care for. My brother Guichard will inherit my fiefs; and if I am not in error, that will content him amply for my death. Life is a little vapour that passeth away, as we are told by those in holy orders. When a man is in a fair way and sees all life open in front of him, he seems to himself to make a very important figure in

the world. His horse whinnies to him; the trumpets blow and the girls look out of window as he rides into town before his company; he receives many assurances of trust and regard—sometimes by express in a letter—sometimes face to face, with persons of consequence falling on his neck. It is not wonderful if his head is turned for a time. But once he is dead, were he as brave as Hercules or as wise as Solomon, he is soon forgotten. It is not ten years since my father fell, with many other knights around him, in a very fierce encounter, and I do not think that any one of them, nor so much as the name of the fight, is now remembered. No, no, madam, the nearer you come to it, you see that death is a dark and dusty corner, where a man gets into his tomb and has the door shut after him till the judgment day. I have few friends just

now, and once I am dead I shall have none."

"Ah, Monsieur de Beaulieu!" she exclaimed, "you forget Blanche de Malé-troit."

"You have a sweet nature, madam, and you are pleased to estimate a little service far beyond its worth."

"It is not that," she answered. "You mistake me if you think I am easily touched by my own concerns. I say so, because you are the noblest man I have ever met; because I recognize in you a spirit that would have made even a common person famous in the land."

"And yet here I die in a mousetrap—with no more noise about it than my own squeaking," answered he.

A look of pain crossed her face, and she was silent for a little while. Then a light came into her eyes, and with a smile she spoke again.

"I cannot have my champion think

meanly of himself. Anyone who gives his life for another will be met in Paradise by all the heralds and angels of the Lord God. And you have no such cause to hang your head. For . . . Pray, do you think me beautiful?" she asked, with a deep flush.

"Indeed, madam, I do," he said.

"I am glad of that," she answered heartily. "Do you think there are many men in France who have been asked in marriage by a beautiful maiden—with her own lips—and who have refused her to her face? I know you men would half despise such a triumph; but believe me, we women know more of what is precious in love. There is nothing that should set a person higher in his own esteem; and we women would prize nothing more dearly."

"You are very good," he said; "but you cannot make me forget that I was asked in pity and not for love."

"I am not so sure of that," she replied, holding down her head. "Hear me to an end, Monsieur de Beaulieu. I know how you must despise me; I feel you are right to do so; I am too poor a creature to occupy one thought of your mind, although, alas! you must die for me this morning. But when I asked you to marry me, indeed, and indeed, it was because I respected and admired you, and loved you with my whole soul, from the very moment that you took my part against my uncle. If you had seen yourself, and how noble you looked, you would pity rather than despise me. And now," she went on, hurriedly checking him with her hand, "although I have laid aside all reserve and told you so much, remember that I know your sentiments towards me already. I would not, believe me, being nobly born, weary you with importunities into consent. I, too, have a pride

of my own: and I declare before the holy mother of God, if you should now go back from your word already given, I would no more marry you than I would marry my uncle's groom."

Denis smiled a little bitterly.

"It is a small love," he said, "that shies at a little pride."

She made no answer, although she probably had her own thoughts.

"Come hither to the window," he said with a sigh. "Here is the dawn."

And indeed the dawn was already beginning. The hollow of the sky was full of essential daylight, colourless and clean; and the valley underneath was flooded with a grey reflection. A few thin vapours clung in the coves of the forest or lay along the winding course of the river. The scene disengaged a surprising effect of stillness, which was hardly interrupted when the cocks began once more to crow among the

steadings. Perhaps the same fellow who had made so horrid a clangour in the darkness not half an hour before, now sent up the merriest cheer to greet the coming day. A little wind went bustling and eddying among the tree-tops underneath the windows. And still the daylight kept flooding insensibly out of the east, which was soon to grow incandescent and cast up that red-hot cannon-ball, the rising sun.

Denis looked out over all this with a bit of a shiver. He had taken her hand, and retained it in his almost unconsciously.

"Has the day begun already?" she said; and then, illogically enough: "the night has been so long! Alas! what shall we say to my uncle when he returns?"

"What you will," said Denis, and he pressed her fingers in his.

She was silent.

"Blanche," he said with a swift, uncertain, passionate utterance, "you have seen whether I fear death. You must know well enough that I would as gladly leap out of that window into the empty air, as to lay a finger on you without your free and full consent. But if you care for me at all do not let me lose my life in a misapprehension; for I love you better than the whole world; and though I will die for you blithely, it would be like all the joys of Paradise to live on and spend my life in your service."

As he stopped speaking, a bell began to ring loudly in the interior of the house; and a clatter of armour in the corridor showed that the retainers were returning to their post, and the two hours were at an end.

"After all that you have heard?" she whispered, leaning towards him with her lips and eyes.

"I have heard nothing," he replied.

"The captain's name was Florimond de Champdivers," she said in his ear.

"I did not hear it," he answered, taking her supple body in his arms, and covered her wet face with kisses.

A melodious chirping was audible behind, followed by a beautiful chuckle, and the voice of Messire de Malétroit wished his new nephew a good morning.

*The Autocrat and
the Schoolmistress*

BY

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

The Autocrat and the School- mistress

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I

MY LAST WALK WITH THE SCHOOLMISTRESS

I can't say just how many walks she and I had taken together before this one. I found the effect of going out every morning was decidedly favorable on her health. Two pleasing dimples, the places for which were just marked when she came, played, shadowy, in her freshening cheeks when she smiled and nodded good-morning to me from the schoolhouse-steps.

I am afraid I did the greater part of the talking. At any rate, if I should try to report all that I said during the first half-dozen walks we took together, I fear that I might receive a gentle hint from my friends the publishers, that a separate volume, at my own risk and expense, would be the proper method of bringing them before the public.

——I would have a woman as true as Death. At the first real lie which works from the heart outward, she should be tenderly chloroformed into a better world, where she can have an angel for a governess, and feed on strange fruits which will make her all over again, even to her bones and marrow.—Whether gifted with the accident of beauty or not, she should have been moulded in the rose-red clay of Love, before the breath of life made a moving mortal of her. Love-capacity is a

congenital endowment; and I think, after a while, one gets to know the warm-hued natures it belongs to from the pretty pipe-clay counterfeits of it. —Proud she may be, in the sense of respecting herself; but pride, in the sense of contemning others less gifted than herself, deserves the two lowest circles of a vulgar woman's Inferno, where the punishments are Small-pox and Bankruptcy.—She who nips off the end of a brittle courtesy, as one breaks the tip of an icicle, to bestow upon those whom she ought cordially and kindly to recognize, proclaims the fact that she comes not merely of low blood, but of bad blood. Consciousness of unquestioned position makes people gracious in proper measure to all; but if a woman puts on airs with her real equals, she has something about herself or her family she is ashamed of, or ought to be. Middle,

and more than middle-aged people, who know family histories, generally see through it. An official of standing was rude to me once. Oh, that is the maternal grandfather,—said a wise old friend to me,—he was a boor.—Better too few words, from the woman we love, than too many: while she is silent, Nature is working for her; while she talks, she is working for herself.—Love is sparingly soluble in the words of men; therefore they speak much of it; but one syllable of woman's speech can dissolve more of it than a man's heart can hold.

——Whether I said any or all of these things to the schoolmistress, or not,—whether I stole them out of Lord Bacon,—whether I cribbed them from Balzac,—whether I dipped them from the ocean of Tupperian wisdom,—or whether I have just found them in my head, laid there by that solemn fowl,

Experience, (who, according to my observation, cackles oftener than she drops real live eggs,) I cannot say. Wise men have said more foolish things,—and foolish men, I don't doubt, have said as wise things. Anyhow, the schoolmistress and I had pleasant walks and long talks, all of which I do not feel bound to report.

—You are a stranger to me, Ma'am,—I don't doubt you would like to know all I said to the schoolmistress. —I shan't do it;—I had rather get the publishers to return the money you have invested in this. Besides, I have forgotten a good deal of it. I shall tell only what I like of what I remember.

—My idea was, in the first place, to search out the picturesque spots which the city affords a sight of, to those who have eyes. I know a good many, and it was a pleasure to look at them in company with my young friend. There

were the shrubs and flowers in the Franklin-Place front-yards or borders; Commerce is just putting his granite foot upon them. Then there are certain small seraglio-gardens, into which one can get a peep through the crevices of high fences,—one in Myrtle Street, or backing on it,—here and there one at the North and South Ends. Then the great elms in Essex Street. Then the stately horse-chestnuts in that vacant lot in Chambers Street, which hold their outspread hands over your head, (as I said in my poem the other day,) and look as if they were whispering, “May grace, mercy, and peace be with you!”—and the rest of that benediction. Nay, there are certain patches of ground, which, having lain neglected for a time, Nature, who always has her pockets full of seeds, and holes in all her pockets, has covered with hungry plebeian growths, which fight for life

with each other, until some of them get broad-leaved and succulent, and you have a coarse vegetable tapestry which Raphael would not have disdained to spread over the foreground of his masterpiece. The Professor pretends that he found such a one in Charles Street, which, in its daredevil impudence of rough-and-tumble vegetation, beat the pretty-behaved flowerbeds of the Public Garden as ignominiously as a group of young tatterdemalions playing pitch-and-toss beats a row of Sunday-school boys with their teacher at their head.

But then the Professor has one of his burrows in that region, and puts everything in high colors relating to it. That is his way about everything.—I hold any man cheap,—he said,—of whom nothing stronger can be uttered than that all his geese are swans.—How is that, Professor?—said I;—I

should have set you down for one of that sort.—Sir,—said he,—I am proud to say, that Nature has so far enriched me, that I cannot own so much as a *duck* without seeing in it as pretty a swan as ever swam the basin in the garden of Luxembourg. And the Professor showed the whites of his eyes devoutly, like one returning thanks after a dinner of many courses.

I don't know anything sweeter than this leaking in of Nature through all the cracks in the walls and floors of cities. You heap up a million tons of hewn rocks on a square mile or two of earth which was green once. The trees look down from the hill-sides and ask each other, as they stand on tip-toe,—“What are these people about?” And the small herbs at their feet look up and whisper back,—“We will go and see.” So the small herbs pack themselves up in the least possible

bundles, and wait until the wind steals to them at night and whispers,—“Come with me.” Then they go softly with it into the great city,—one to a cleft in the pavement, one to a spout on the roof, one to a seam in the marbles over a rich gentleman’s bones, and one to the grave without a stone where nothing but a man is buried,—and there they grow, looking down on the generations of men from mouldy roofs, looking up from between the less-trodden pavements, looking out through iron cemetery-railings. Listen to them, when there is only a light breath stirring, and you will hear them saying to each other,—“Wait awhile!” The words run along the telegraph of those narrow green lines that border the roads leading from the city, until they reach the slope of the hills, and the trees repeat in low murmurs to each other,—“Wait awhile!” By-and-by the

flow of life in the streets ebbs, and the old leafy inhabitants — the smaller tribes always in front—saunter in, one by one very careless seemingly, but very tenacious, until they swarm so that the great stones gape from each other with the crowding of their roots, and the feldspar begins to be picked out of the granite to find them food. At last the trees take up their solemn line of march, and never rest until they have encamped in the market-place. Wait long enough and you will find an old doting oak hugging a huge worn-block in its yellow underground arms; that was the corner-stone of the State-House. Oh, so patient she is, this imperturbable Nature!

——Let us cry!——

But all this has nothing to do with my walks and talks with the school-mistress. I did not say that I would not tell you something about them.

Let me alone, and I shall talk to you more than I ought to, probably. We never tell our secrets to people that pump for them.

Books we talked about, and education. It was her duty to know something of these, and of course she did. Perhaps I was somewhat more learned than she, but I found that the difference between her reading and mine was like that of a man's and a woman's dusting a library. The man flaps about with a bunch of feathers; the woman goes to work softly with a cloth. She does not raise half the dust, nor fill her own eyes and mouth with it, —but she goes into all the corners, and attends to the leaves as much as the covers.—Books are the *negative* pictures of thought, and the more sensitive the mind that receives their images, the more nicely the finest lines are reproduced. A woman, (of the right

kind,) reading after a man, follows him as Ruth followed the reapers of Boaz, and her gleanings are often the finest of the wheat.

But it was in talking of Life that we came most nearly together. I thought I knew something about that,—that I could speak or write about it somewhat to the purpose.

To take up this fluid earthly being of ours, as a sponge sucks up water,—to be steeped and soaked in its realities as a hide fills its pores lying seven years in a tan-pit,—to have winnowed every wave of it as a mill-wheel works up the stream that runs through the flume upon its float boards,—to have curled up in the keenest spasms and flattened out in the laxest languors of this breathing-sickness, which keeps certain parcels of matter uneasy for three or four score years,—to have fought all the devils and clasped all the angels of

its delirium,—and then, just at the point when the white-hot passions have cooled down to cherry-red, plunge our experience into the ice-cold stream of some human language or other, one might think would end in a rhapsody with something of spring and temper in it. All this I thought my power and province.

The schoolmistress had tried life, too. Once in a while one meets with a single soul greater than all the living pageant that passes before it. As the pale astronomer sits in his study with sunken eyes and thin fingers, and weighs Uranus or Neptune as in a balance, so there are meek, slight women who have weighed all that this planetary life can offer, and hold it like a bauble in the palm of their slender hands. This was one of them. Fortune had left her, sorrow had baptized her; the routine of labor and the lone-

liness of almost friendless city-life were before her. Yet, as I looked upon her tranquil face, gradually regaining a cheerfulness that was often sprightly, as she became interested in the various matters we talked about and places we visited, I saw that eye and lip and every shifting lineament were made for love,—unconscious of their sweet office as yet, and meeting the cold aspect of Duty with the natural graces which were meant for the reward of nothing less than the Great Passion.

——I never spoke one word of love to the schoolmistress in the course of these pleasant walks. It seemed to me that we talked of everything but love on that particular morning. There was, perhaps, a little more timidity and hesitancy on my part than I have commonly shown among our people at the boarding-house. In fact, I considered myself the master at the breakfast-

table; but, somehow, I could not command myself just then so well as usual. The truth is, I had secured a passage to Liverpool in the steamer which was to leave at noon,—with the condition, however, of being released in case circumstances occurred to detain me. The schoolmistress knew nothing about all this, of course, as yet.

It was on the Common that we were walking. The *mall*, or boulevard of our Common, you know, has various branches leading from it in different directions. One of these runs downward from opposite Joy Street southward across the whole length of the Common to Boylston Street. We called it the long path, and were fond of it.

I felt very weak indeed (though of a tolerably robust habit) as we came opposite the head of this path on that morning. I think I tried to speak

twice without making myself distinctly audible. At last I got out the question,—will you take the long path with me? — Certainly, — said the schoolmistress,—with much pleasure. —Think,—I said,—before you answer; if you take the long path with me now, I shall interpret it that we are to part no more!—The schoolmistress stepped back with a sudden movement, as if an arrow had struck her.

One of the long granite blocks used as seats was hard by,—the one you may still see close by the Gingko-tree.—Pray, sit down,—I said.—No, no,—she answered, softly,—I will walk the *long path* with you!

—The old gentleman who sits opposite met us walking, arm in arm, about the middle of the long path, and said, very charmingly,—“Good morning, my dears!”

II

THE LONG PATH

Yes, that was my last walk with the *schoolmistress*. It happened to be the end of a term; and before the next began, a very nice young woman, who had been her assistant, was announced as her successor, and she was provided for elsewhere. So it was no longer the schoolmistress that I walked with, but——Let us not be in unseemly haste. I shall call her the schoolmistress still; some of you love her under that name.

——When it became known among the boarders that two of their number had joined hands to walk down the long path of life side by side, there was, as you may suppose, no small sensation. I confess I pitied our land-

lady. It took her all of a suddin'—she said. Had not known that we was keepin' company, and never mistrusted anything partic'lar. Ma'am was right to better herself. Didn't look very rugged to take care of a femily, but could get hired haälp, she calc'lated.—The great maternal instinct came crowding up in her soul just then, and her eyes wandered until they settled on her daughter.

——No, poor, dear woman,—that could not have been. But I am dropping one of my internal tears for you, with this pleasant smile on my face all the time.

The great mystery of God's providence is the permitted crushing out of flowering instincts. Life is maintained by the respiration of oxygen and of sentiments. In the long catalogue of scientific cruelties there is hardly anything quite so painful to think of as

that experiment of putting an animal under the bell of an air-pump and exhausting the air from it. [I never saw the accursed trick performed. *Laus Deo!*] There comes a time when the souls of human beings, women, perhaps, more even than men, begin to faint for the atmosphere of the affections they were made to breathe. Then it is that Society places its transparent bell-glass over the young woman who is to be the subject of one of its fatal experiments. The element by which only the heart lives is sucked out of her crystalline prison. Watch her through its transparent walls;—her bosom is heaving; but it is in a vacuum. Death is no riddle, compared to this. I remember a poor girl's story in the "Book of Martyrs." The "dry-pan and the gradual fire" were the images that frightened her most. How many have withered and wasted under as slow a

torment in the walls of that larger Inquisition which we call Civilization!

Yes, my surface-thought laughs at you, you foolish, plain, overdressed, mincing, cheaply-organized, self-saturated young person, whoever you may be, now reading this,—little thinking you are what I describe, and in blissful unconsciousness that you are destined to the lingering asphyxia of soul which is the lot of such multitudes worthier than yourself. But it is only my surface-thought which laughs. For that great procession of the UNLOVED, who not only wear the crown of thorns, but must hide it under the locks of brown or gray,—under the snowy cap, under the chilling turban,—hide it even from themselves,—perhaps never know they wear it, though it kills them,—there is no depth of tenderness in my nature that Pity has not sounded. Some-

where—somewhere,—love is in store for them,—the universe must not be allowed to fool them so cruelly. What infinite pathos in the small, half-unconscious artifices by which unattractive young persons seek to recommend themselves to the favor of those towards whom our dear sisters, the unloved, like the rest, are impelled by their God-given instincts!

Read what the singing-women—one to ten thousand of the suffering women—tell us, and think of the griefs that die unspoken! Nature is in earnest when she makes a woman; and there are women enough lying in the next churchyard with very commonplace blue slate-stones at their head and feet, for whom it was just as true that “all sounds of life assumed one tone of love,” as for Letitia Landon, of whom Elizabeth Browning said it; but she could give words to her grief, and they

could not.—Will you hear a few stanzas of mine?

THE VOICELESS

We count the broken lyres that rest
Where the sweet wailing singers slumber,—
But o'er their silent sister's breast
The wild flowers who will stoop to number?
A few can touch the magic string,
And noisy Fame is proud to win them;—
Alas for those that never sing,
But die with all their music in them!

Nay, grieve not for the dead alone
Whose song has told their hearts' sad story,—
Weep for the voiceless, who have known
The cross without the crown of glory!
Not where Leucadian breezes sweep
O'er Sappho's memory-haunted billow,
But where the glistening night-dews weep
On nameless sorrow's churchyard pillow.

O hearts that break and give no sign
Save whitening lip and fading tresses,
Till Death pours out his cordial wine
Slow-dropped from Misery's crushing presses,—
If singing breath or echoing chord
To every hidden pang were given,
What endless melodies were poured,
As sad as earth, as sweet as heaven!

I hope that our landlady's daughter is not so badly off, after all. That young man from another city, who made the remark which you remember about Boston State-house and Boston folks, has appeared at our table repeatedly of late, and has seemed to me rather attentive to this young lady. Only last evening I saw him leaning over her while she was playing the accordion,—indeed, I undertook to join them in a song, and got as far as "Come rest in this boo-oo," when, my voice getting tremulous, I turned off, as one steps out of a procession, and left the basso and soprano to finish it. I see no reason why this young woman should not be a very proper match for a man that laughs about Boston State-house. He can't be very particular.

The young fellow whom I have so often mentioned was a little free in his remarks, but very good-natured.—

Sorry to have you go,—he said.—Schoolma'am made a mistake not to wait for me. Haven't taken anything but mournin' fruit at breakfast since I heard of it.—*Mourning fruit*,—said I,—what's that?—Huckle-berries and blackberries,—said he;—couldn't eat in colors, raspberries, currants, and such, after a solemn thing like this happening.—The conceit seemed to please the young fellow. If you will believe it, when we came down to breakfast the next morning, he had carried it out as follows. You know those odious little "saäs-plates" that figure so largely at boarding-houses, and especially at taverns, into which a strenuous attendant female trowels little dabs, sombre of tint and heterogeneous of composition, which it makes you feel homesick to look at, and into which you poke the elastic coppery teaspoon with the air of a cat dipping her foot into a wash-tub,

—(not that I mean to say anything against them, for, when they are of tinted porcelain or starry many-faceted crystal, and hold clean bright berries, or pale virgin honey, or “lucent syrups tinct with cinnamon,” and the teaspoon is of white silver, with the Tower-stamp, solid, but not brutally heavy,—as people in the green stage of millionism will have them,—I can dally with their amber semi-fluids or glossy spherules without a shiver,)—you know these small, deep dishes, I say. When we came down the next morning, each of these (two only excepted) was covered with a broad leaf. On lifting this, each boarder found a small heap of solemn black huckle-berries. But one of those plates held red currants, and was covered with a red rose; the other held white currants, and was covered with a white rose. There was a laugh at this at first, and then a short silence, and I

noticed that her lip trembled, and the old gentleman opposite was in trouble to get at his bandanna handkerchief.

——“What was the use in waiting? We should be too late for Switzerland, that season, if we waited much longer.” —The hand I held trembled in mine, and the eyes fell meekly, as Esther bowed herself before the feet of Ahasuerus.—She had been reading that chapter, for she looked up,—if there was a film of moisture over her eyes, there was also the faintest shadow of a distant smile skirting her lips, but not enough to accent the dimples,—and said, in her pretty, still way,—“If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes”——

I don't remember what King Ahasuerus did or said when Esther got just to that point of her soft, humble words,—

but I know what I did. That quotation from Scripture was cut short, anyhow. We came to a compromise on the great question, and the time was settled for the last day of summer.

In the meantime, I talked on with our boarders, much as usual, as you may see by what I have reported. I must say, I was pleased with a certain tenderness they all showed toward us, after the first excitement of the news was over. It came out in trivial matters,—but each one, in his or her way, manifested kindness. Our landlady, for instance, when we had chickens, sent the *liver* instead of the *gizzard*, with the wing, for the schoolmistress. This was not an accident; the two are *never* mistaken, though some landladies *appear* as if they did not know the difference. The whole of the company were even more respectfully attentive to my remarks than usual. There was

no idle punning, and very little winking on the part of that lively young gentleman who, as the reader may remember, occasionally interposed some playful question or remark, which could hardly be considered relevant,—except when the least allusion was made to matrimony, when he would look at the landlady's daughter, and wink with both sides of his face, until she would ask what he was pokin' his fun at her for, and if he wasn't ashamed of himself. In fact, they all behaved very handsomely, so that I really felt sorry at the thought of leaving my boarding-house.

I suppose you think, that, because I lived at a plain widow-woman's plain table, I was, of course, more or less infirm in point of worldly fortune. You may not be sorry to learn, that, though not what *great merchants* call very rich, I was comfortable,—comfortable,—so that most of those moderate luxuries I

described in my verses on *Contentment*—*most* of them, I say—were within our reach, if we chose to have them. But I found out that the schoolmistress had a vein of charity about her, which had hitherto been worked on a small silver and copper basis, which made her think less, perhaps, of luxuries than even I did,—modestly as I have expressed my wishes.

It is rather a pleasant thing to tell a poor young woman, whom one has contrived to win without showing his rent-roll, that she has found what the world values so highly, in following the lead of her affections. That was a luxury I was now ready for.

I began abruptly:—Do you know that you are a rich young person?

I know that I am very rich,—she said.—Heaven has given me more than I ever asked; for I had not thought love was ever meant for me.

It was a woman's confession, and her voice fell to a whisper as it threaded the last words.

I don't mean that,—I said,—you blessed little saint and seraph!—if there's an angel missing in the New Jerusalem, inquire for her at this boarding-house!—I don't mean that; I mean that I—that is, you—am—are—confound it!—I mean that you'll be what most people call a lady of fortune.—And I looked full in her eyes for the effect of the announcement.

There wasn't any. She said she was thankful that I had what would save me from drudgery, and that some other time I should tell her about it.—I never made a greater failure in an attempt to produce a sensation.

So the last day of summer came. It was our choice to go to the church, but we had a kind of reception at the boarding-house. The presents were all

arranged, and among them none gave more pleasure than the modest tributes of our fellow-boarders,—for there was not one, I believe, who did not send something. The landlady would insist on making an elegant bride-cake, with her own hands; to which Master Benjamin Franklin wished to add certain embellishments out of his private funds,—namely, a Cupid in a mouse trap, done in white sugar, and two miniature flags with the stars and stripes, which had a very pleasing effect, I assure you. The landlady's daughter sent a richly-bound copy of Tupper's Poems. On a blank leaf was the following, written in a very delicate and careful hand:

Presented to . . . by . . .

On the eve ere her union in holy matrimony.

May sunshine ever beam o'er her!

Even the poor relative thought she must do something, and sent a copy of "The Whole Duty of Man," bound in

very attractive variegated sheepskin, the edges nicely marbled. From the divinity-student came the loveliest English edition of "Keble's Christian Year." I opened it, when it came, to the *Fourth Sunday in Lent*, and read that angelic poem, sweeter than anything I can remember since Xavier's "My God, I love thee."——I am not a Churchman,—I don't believe in planting oaks in flower-pots,—but such a poem as "The Rose-bud" makes one's heart a proselyte to the culture it grows from. Talk about it as much as you like,—one's breeding shows itself nowhere more than in his religion. A man should be a gentleman in his hymns and prayers; the fondness for "scenes," among vulgar saints, contrasts so meanly with that—

"God only and good angels look
Behind the blissful scene,"—

and that other,—

“He could not trust his melting soul
But in his Maker's sight,”

that I hoped some of them will see this, and read the poem, and profit by it.

My laughing and winking young friend undertook to procure and arrange the flowers for the table, and did it with immense zeal. I never saw him look happier than when he came in, his hat saucily on one side, and a cheroot in his mouth, with a huge bunch of tea-roses, which he said were for “Madam.”

One of the last things that came was an old square box, smelling of camphor, tied and sealed. It bore, in faded ink, the marks, “Calcutta, 1805.” On opening it, we found a white Cashmere shawl, with a very brief note from the dear old gentleman opposite, saying that he had kept this some years, thinking he might want it, and many more, not knowing what to do with it,—that

he had never seen it unfolded since he was a young super-cargo,—and now, if she would spread it on her shoulders, it would make him feel young to look at it.

Poor Bridget, or Biddy, our red-armed maid of all work! What must she do but buy a small copper breast-pin and put it under “Shoolma’am’s” plate that morning, at breakfast? And Schoolma’am would wear it,—though I made her cover it, as well as I could, with a tea-rose.

It was my last breakfast as a boarder, and I could not leave them in utter silence.

Good-bye,—I said,—my dear friends, one and all of you! I have been long with you, and I find it hard parting. I have to thank you for a thousand courtesies, and above all for the patience and indulgence with which you have listened to me when I have tried

to instruct or amuse you. My friend the Professor (who, as well as my friend the Poet, is unavoidably absent on this interesting occasion) has given me reason to suppose that he would occupy my empty chair about the first of January next. If he comes among you, be kind to him, as you have been to me. May the Lord bless you all!—And we shook hands all round the table.

Half an hour afterwards the breakfast things and the cloth were gone. I looked up and down the length of the bare boards, over which I had so often uttered my sentiments and experiences—and——Yes, I am a man, like another.

All sadness vanished, as, in the midst of these old friends of mine, whom you know, and others a little more up in the world, perhaps, to whom I have not introduced you, I took the schoolmistress before the altar from the hands of the old gentleman who used

to sit opposite, and who would insist on giving her away.

And now we two are walking the long path in peace together. The "school-mistress" finds her skill in teaching called for again, without going abroad to seek little scholars. Those visions of mine have all come true.

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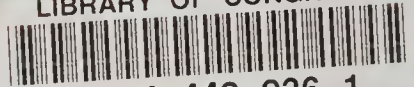
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